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Kant on Cognition and Knowledge

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is widely recognized as one of the most important and influential works of modern philosophy. At the heart of this work lies his theory of cognition (*Erkenntnis*). While many aspects of this theory have received close attention over the past 200 years, it has rarely been asked what exactly Kant means by the term "cognition". It has been common, especially among English-speaking Kant scholars, to identify cognition with knowledge, an identification that was surely encouraged by Kemp Smith's decision to translate *Erkenntnis* as knowledge.¹ For instance, in their groundbreaking books on Kant's theoretical philosophy Henry Allison and Paul Guyer both speak of "knowledge" where Kant talks of "*Erkenntnis*", while the term "cognition" is hardly ever mentioned and is not listed in either index.² Nor is this a peculiarity of the English-speaking literature, as one might suspect. For in the German version of his seminal paper on the proof-structure of the Transcendental Deduction, Dieter Henrich uses "*Erkenntnis*" and "*Wissen*" interchangeably.³ The list of examples could easily be extended. By contrast, we believe that such an identification is at best misleading and at worst a serious mistake that can prevent one from understanding some of Kant's most important claims and arguments in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. While the need for some distinction between knowledge and cognition in Kant has been emphasized in recent scholarship and is reflected in recent translations,⁴ even those who make this distinction typically assume that knowledge is a species of cognition, broadly construed, and that, on a more narrow construal, cognition coincides with knowledge.⁵

By contrast, our main thesis is that Kant's concepts of cognition and knowledge are really disjunct.⁶ Theoretical cognition, taken in the sense that receives special emphasis in the first *Critique*, is a kind of representation that is distinct in kind from knowledge proper (taken either in Kant's sense or in the contemporary sense of warranted true belief), yet one that fulfills several complex and closely related semantic and epistemological functions. For cognition, in the basic kind of case, is a mental state through which we are aware of the existence and (some of the) general features of objects. As a result, cognition, taken in this sense, cannot be equated with knowledge, since it is not an assent and does not require justification or warrant. Conversely, knowledge requires neither the existence of an object of knowledge nor the attribution of general features to it.⁷ Though cognition cannot, for that reason, be identified with knowledge and knowledge is not a species of cognition, cognition can still be epistemologically relevant insofar as it contributes to the kind of "sufficient objective ground" that, according to Kant, is required for knowledge.⁸

To show that and how cognition and knowledge are distinct, it is first (I) necessary to investigate Kant's explicit characterizations of the nature of cognition. As it turns out, he introduces several different notions that must be carefully distinguished before identifying the one that is central to his project in the first *Critique*. Then (II), we consider the basic features of Kant's conception of knowledge, indicating both how it involves assent and objective justification and how it relates to our contemporary conception.

Only then (III) will we be in a position to compare and contrast Kant's understanding of cognition and his conception of knowledge in a way that allows us to see clearly their fundamental differences and connections. Finally (IV), by appreciating the differences between cognition and knowledge, we will be able to understand the implications this conception of cognition has for some of Kant's main claims in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a whole.

I. Kant's Conceptions of Cognition

In three separate places Kant provides either a definition of cognition or a taxonomy of representations that includes cognition as one of its central components: (1) a passage from the so-called *Jäsche Logik* (9:64), (2) the so-called Stufenleiter passage (A320/370), and (3) several passages at the beginning of the Transcendental Logic (A50-51/B74-75; A92/B125; B137; B146). Though Kant introduces several somewhat different notions of cognition, it turns out that his project in the first *Critique* emphasizes one relatively narrow notion in particular.⁹

Kant's most comprehensive and detailed classification involving cognition can be found in the so-called *Jäsche Logik*, where he distinguishes seven "degrees of cognition":

The first degree of cognition is: to represent something;

The second: to represent something with consciousness, or to perceive (percipere);

The *third*: to be acquainted with something (*noscere*), or to represent something in comparison with other things, both as to *sameness* and as to *difference*.

The *fourth*: to be acquainted with something *with consciousness*, i.e., to *cognize* it (*cognoscere*). Animals are *acquainted with* objects too, but they do not *cognize* them.

The *fifth*: to *understand* something (*intelligere*), i.e., to *cognize* something *through the understanding by means of concepts*, or to *conceive*. One can conceive much, although one cannot comprehend it, e.g., a *perpetuum mobile*, whose impossibility is shown in mechanics.

The *sixth*: to *cognize* something through reason, or *to have insight* into it (*perspicere*). With few things do we get this far, and our cognitions become fewer and fewer in number the more that we seek to perfect them as to content.

The *seventh, finally*: to *comprehend* something (*comprehendere*), i.e., to *cognize* something through reason or *a priori* to the degree that is sufficient for our purpose (9:64-65).¹⁰

This complex passage provides a number of interesting distinctions and terminological clarifications. Insofar as there are seven degrees of cognition, it is clear that Kant must be operating at the start with an extremely general notion of cognition, one that is equivalent, in effect, to that of representation (or “representing something”), which he classifies here as the first degree of

cognition and regards elsewhere as indefinable (9:33). The second through seventh degrees of cognition are then naturally understood as more specific kinds of that most generic notion. It does not seem to be the case, however, that each degree is necessarily a specification of the previous one, since the fifth degree does not obviously presuppose the fourth (though one might read it in that way) and the third may not be an instance of the second (given what Kant says about the fourth). Also, the fourth degree of cognition stands out from the others insofar as it is labeled “to cognize (*cognoscere*)” and thus appears to be not just one species among others, but rather cognition in a more proper sense. In any case, what unites these different degrees of cognition is that they all are cases of cognition in the broadest sense of “representing something”.

In the so-called *Stufenleiter* passage, which provides a general taxonomy of different kinds of representation, Kant introduces a slightly different conception of cognition:

The genus is representation in general (*repraesentatio*). Under it stands the representation with consciousness (*perceptio*). A perception that refers to the subject as a modification of its state is a sensation (*sensatio*); an objective perception is a cognition (*cognitio*). The latter is either an intuition or a concept (*intuitus vel conceptus*). The former is immediately related to the object and is singular; the latter is mediate, by means of a mark, which can be common to several things. A concept is either an empirical or a pure concept, and the pure

concept, insofar as it has its origin solely in the understanding (not in a pure image of sensibility), is called *notio*. A concept made up of notions, which goes beyond the possibility of experience, is an idea or a concept of reason (A320/B377).

According to this passage, a cognition is any conscious representation that is “objective”, i.e. related to an object either mediately or immediately, and it contrasts only with sensations, which are not objective in the appropriate sense, and with any representations of which we are not conscious at all.¹¹ Thus, according to this taxonomy an idea seems to qualify as a cognition, as do intuitions and concepts taken on their own.¹² Moreover, since we can have ideas of objects that do not exist, such as “a perfect republic” (9:93), the fact that cognition in this sense involves a relation to an object cannot require successful reference. Instead, it presupposes only that the representation in question have a (logically possible) content so that it purports to represent some object (in the widest sense).

If we compare the *Stufenleiter* passage to the passage from the *Jäsche Logik*, several points of overlap and contrast emerge. For example, perception is defined in similar terms in both passages. Also, the fourth and fifth degrees of cognition *seem* to be instances of the *Stufenleiter*’s sense of cognition as objective conscious representation, with the fourth involving consciousness in (or through) an intuition and the fifth consciousness in (or through) a concept. However, the *Jäsche Logik* mentions some narrower notions of cognition that do not feature in the *Stufenleiter*, such as the sixth

and seventh degrees, both of which involve reason (either through insight or in the guise of comprehension) and may somehow correspond to, but are not identical with the “notions” and “ideas” mentioned in the *Stufenleiter* passage.¹³

While both the *Jäsche Logik* and *Stufenleiter* passages start with very broad and generic notions and then distinguish various *species* within the relevant genus, there are other passages in which Kant introduces a much more specific conception of cognition, according to which cognition is the awareness of the existence of an object and of at least some of its general features. For example, prior to the Transcendental Deduction Kant writes: “there are two conditions under which alone the cognition of an object is possible: first, **intuition**, through which it is given, but only as appearance; second, **concept**, through which an object is thought that corresponds to this intuition” (A92/B125).¹⁴ According to this passage, cognition of an object requires *both* an intuition and a corresponding concept (A51/B76f.; cf. 24:752). That is, cognition in this sense must satisfy two conditions: (i) a *givenness*-condition, according to which an object must be given to the mind and (ii) a *thought*-condition, according to which the given object must be conceptually determined (cf. A50/B74; A92/B125; B137; B146).¹⁵ Although Kant never explicitly defines givenness as such, in its most general sense it seems to mean that an object is made available to the mind so that one can be aware of the existence of the object and (at least some of) its features.¹⁶ Kant claims that in human beings givenness involves passivity insofar as the

object must act on our sensibility to be given to us (cf. A19/B33). For a possible divine mind, by contrast, its objects would be given to it just by being represented (in intellectual intuition).¹⁷ Thus it is only for finite beings like ourselves that objects are given in sensible intuition, which for Kant means that the object is represented not as exhibiting general features, but in its particularity. Similarly, only in finite beings does the thought-condition require the use of general concepts (which represent an object not in its entirety, but only partially, through marks it shares with other objects; cf. A68/B93; A320/B377; 9:58), while the contrast between intuition and concept would fall away for the divine mind (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §§76-77).

It is thus in the context of applying this narrower conception of cognition to the case of human beings that Kant claims that cognition requires the involvement of both sensibility and understanding: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. [...] Only from their [viz. understanding and senses] unification can cognition arise” (A51/B75-6). It is only through sensibility that objects are “given” to us in such a way that cognition, unlike an “empty” thought, is able to represent and refer to particular objects (rather than fail to refer), and it is only through the understanding that objects can be “thought”, or “determined” by discursive concepts (rather than be “blind”, or indeterminate). As a result, cognition in this sense requires the collaboration of both sensibility and understanding, intuition and concept. That is, neither intuitions nor concepts

on their own qualify as cognition in the narrow sense. Moreover, an idea cannot be a cognition in this sense, since the objects of ideas cannot be given to the senses (A327/B383) and thus cannot be represented as such in human intuition. Even though this narrow sense of cognition is not explicitly introduced in either the *Jäsche Logik* or the *Stufenleiter* passages, it is what Kant in one place calls “cognition in the proper sense” (*Erkenntnis in eigentlicher Bedeutung*) (A78/B103; cf. B149).

Taking stock so far, we can see that the term “cognition” can have a great variety of senses in Kant’s writings, sometimes meaning representation in general and other times indicating more or less specific kinds of representation, where some require consciousness, a relation to an object, reflection, or reason, while others do not. This means that only the broader context will allow one to decide which sense of “cognition” is at stake in any particular passage. Amidst this plethora of uses, however, Kant singles out one specific sense as “cognition in the proper sense”, which is highlighted at the beginning of the *Transcendental Logic*, and is essential to his project in the first *Critique* as a whole.

This special sense of cognition allows for further refinement along two dimensions. The thought-condition requires not only that concepts classify objects by means of their general features, but also that the concepts in question can be shown to have what Kant calls “objective reality”, or a “relation to an object” (A109).¹⁸ That is, one must, Kant suggests, be able to show that a concept can in fact be applied to an object, because otherwise, it

might turn out to be an empty concept and thus “a mere form of a thought” (B148) such that one could not judge whether its object is possible.¹⁹ Indeed, one of Kant’s basic concerns about the metaphysical claims of his rationalist predecessors is that their concepts might be flights of fancy that do not connect up with actual objects in the appropriate way. (Such a failure could occur either by these concepts lacking in objective representational content and thus failing to refer or by our not being in a position to show that these concepts can refer to their objects, even if they do have a content that is determinate enough to refer.)²⁰ This aspect of the thought-condition is thus particularly pressing for the pure concepts of the understanding, or categories, since it is not immediately obvious that such non-empirical concepts can be applied to objects.²¹

The givenness-condition stands in need of further refinement, too, since givenness can take different forms in different cases. It seems that for Kant the paradigmatic case of givenness is one in which an empirical object is represented in empirical intuition (or experience), which involves sensation and thus the “actual presence of the object” (A50/B74). In this sense, only objects that actually exist and are immediately present to mind satisfy the givenness-condition. Besides this paradigmatic case, though, Kant seems to apply the givenness-condition in a more relaxed way, allowing other kinds of objects to be given, too, such as mathematical objects (which are given by being constructed in pure intuition; cf. A224/B271) and empirical objects, like magnetic matter, that we cannot in fact perceive (but which could be given

in “possible experience” if our senses were finer, cf. A226/B273). Moreover, this more relaxed way of applying the givenness-condition might be relevant to how it can be satisfied in cases of universal cognition (e.g. the Principles of the Pure Understanding, cf. A762/B790, or empirical generalizations such as “all bodies are heavy”, cf. A8/B12), if, in these cases, the condition cannot be met by all relevant objects being given in an actual intuition. Thus, Kant’s notion of “givenness” seems to differ from Russellian “acquaintance” in that an object that is not actually present to mind can count as “given” in the sense required for cognition in the narrow sense, as long as it actually exists (or has existed) and is an object of possible experience (or, in the mathematical case, as long as it can be constructed in pure intuition).

One may wonder whether, in addition to the givenness- and thought-conditions, a third requirement must be placed on cognition in the narrow sense, namely truth. However, Kant never seems to draw any explicit connection between cognition in the narrow sense and truth. To the contrary, when he discusses truth in the first *Critique*, he treats it as a property that cognitions may either have or fail to have, explicitly allowing for the possibility of false cognition: “a cognition is false if it does not agree with the object to which it is related even if it contains something that could well be valid of other objects” (A58/B83).²² Since a false cognition, according to this passage, still relates to an object and contains a concept that could hold of other objects, it would seem that both the givenness- and the thought-condition are satisfied, so that Kant can be taken to be talking about

cognition in the narrow sense here and to allow for it to be false.²³ However, even if Kant were to hold that cognition in the narrow sense does require truth, he could still regard a representation that satisfies both the givenness- and the thought-condition, while being false, as a cognition in some broader sense. Moreover, Kant may be speaking of false cognition only in a derivative sense (as in “false friend”), as does Meier, whose textbook Kant used in his logic lectures and according to whom “false cognition is a cognition that is not cognition, but merely seems to be cognition” (*Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre*, §92). Given that Kant neither clearly requires truth for cognition in the narrow sense nor clearly denies such a requirement,²⁴ we leave open the question of how cognition in the narrow sense relates to truth. However, we do not want to deny that cognition must represent the object in some minimally accurate way to refer to it at all.

Because cognition in the narrow sense requires satisfaction of the givenness- and thought-conditions in the sense just specified, it can be seen to have several crucial semantic and epistemic features. First, by satisfying the givenness-condition it represents, and refers to, *particular* objects that *exist* or are *actual*.²⁵ By contrast, cognition in the broader sense of the *Stufenleiter* passage does not require representations of particulars, nor does it guarantee successful reference. Second, by satisfying the thought-condition cognition in the narrow sense discriminates and classifies objects by virtue of their features. Thus, if I cognize an object as a table, I can discriminate it from those objects in its environment that display different

features (the floor and the ceiling) and classify it as having features that it shares with some other objects (other tables). Again, cognition in the broad sense may not involve discrimination or classification, since intuitions, taken in isolation, can be “blind” in that regard. And third, cognition in the narrow sense represents existing objects and their features in such a way as to afford an immediate *awareness* of them. In other words, cognition makes the existence and features of objects available to one’s mind and thus can serve as the basis for attitudes such as belief or knowledge (more on which below). As a result, cognition in the narrow sense has specific semantic and epistemic features that are richer than those had by cognition in the broader sense. Kant’s emphasis on objects being given in intuition and thought through concepts gives expression to these substantive features. That is, Kant’s focus on cognition derives from the importance of representing objects that exist and to do so in ways that allow us to discriminate between them, since without the ability to represent objects in this way, there would be little point, and even less hope of success in attempting to represent objects at all or to gain knowledge about them.

Cognition in the narrow sense also relates to judgment (albeit in complex ways we can mention only briefly). At times, Kant seems to conceive of judgment very generally such that it is a conscious representation that unifies a plurality of representations under a concept (cf. 9:101, A68/B93). Cognition in the narrow sense takes the form of a judgment in this sense. For example, the mental state which I am in when I seem to

see a red ball in front of me is already a judgment insofar as it unites two representations (*ball*, *red*) in one act of consciousness by “comprehending” the one under the other. At other times, however, Kant has a somewhat narrower conception of judgment (e.g., in judgments of experience) that is objective in the sense of representing a state of affairs as holding independently from the judging subject (B141f.; 4:298). At least some cognitions in the narrow sense would qualify as judgments in this sense. For example, the empirical cognition that this ball is red would be a judgment in this sense. It is important to recognize that judgment in both of these senses, and cognition along with it, does not necessarily involve assent, or taking the proposition in question to be true.²⁶ In this respect, Kant differs from Frege, for whom judgment itself is an assent to a proposition (“*Gedanke*”).²⁷

Another aspect worth mentioning is that cognition in the narrow sense, as such, does not require epistemic justification. This is not to deny that cognition may, in some indirect way, require *philosophical* justification. For instance, for a representation to qualify as cognition, it must satisfy the thought condition, which requires establishing the objective reality of the concept(s) employed in that representation. In case these concepts are “pure” (a priori) concepts (such as the categories or ideas of reason), they require a “transcendental deduction”, that is, proof of their objective reality (or, equivalently, of the real possibility of their object). This is what we take to be Kant’s point when he says that “[t]o cognize an object, it is required that I be able to prove its possibility” (Bxxvi fn.).²⁸ In this way, cognition does

involve a normative dimension (“*quid juris*”). But such a proof is obviously different from the epistemic justification of a particular belief that is required for knowledge – a justification that does not consist in showing a concept to have objective reality (or an object to be ‘really possible’), but in showing a belief to be true.

Against this, it might be objected that Kant’s focus on the possibility of synthetic cognition a priori (cf. B19) shows that cognition does require epistemic justification after all, since Kant is obviously interested not only in whether a priori concepts such as *cause* or *soul* have objective reality, but also in whether we can prove certain synthetic judgments a priori such as ‘Every event has a cause’ or ‘The souls of human beings are immortal’ (with Kant giving a positive answer in the first and a negative one in the second case). But note, first, that it is not at all obvious that the “possibility” of synthetic cognition a priori Kant is interested in is the same as their being epistemically justified (even though Kant might be interested in that as well). And, second, our claim that cognition as such does not require epistemic justification does not rule out that there are specific kinds of cognition (such as the ‘principles of pure understanding’) that do require epistemic justification (even though it may be more adequate to say that what requires epistemic justification is our belief in them, not the cognitions themselves).

Having clarified the broader and narrower conceptions of cognition in these ways, we can now see that it is the narrower conception that plays an especially central role in Kant’s project in the first *Critique*. Kant states that

one of his primary motivations in this work is to determine whether metaphysics is possible (Axi; Bxivff.). Since, on his analysis, metaphysics would consist of synthetic a priori cognition about various unconditioned objects, such as God, the immortality of the soul, and the world as a totality (including transcendental freedom), he must determine “the possibility, the principles, and the domain of all cognitions *a priori*” (B6) so as to be able to establish whether metaphysics is possible. Throughout the argument of the Transcendental Aesthetic and the Transcendental Analytic, he then shows how distinct contributions from both sensibility and the understanding are required to explain synthetic a priori cognition in general. Accordingly, the Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding is designed to show that the categories cannot be employed on their own, but rather must be applied to objects given in space and time for them to have objective reality and thus for cognition to be possible. Specifically, since the categories are concepts through which objects are thought and since space and time are forms of intuitions through which objects are given, his argument reveals how the thought- and givenness-conditions are satisfied and thus how cognition in the narrower sense is possible. By contrast, no argument would be needed to show that the categories satisfy the conditions on cognition in the broad sense of the *Stufenleiter* passage, since they are conscious representations with objective representational content, even before they have been shown to have objective reality. Thus, what is at stake in the Transcendental Deduction is whether the categories can contribute to

cognition in the narrow sense. Similarly, what is at stake in Kant's critique of traditional metaphysics is whether or not its claims can live up to the standards of cognition in the narrow sense.

II. Kant's Conception of Knowledge

It is striking that throughout much (but not all) of the first *Critique*, Kant does not invoke knowledge and its cognates in an especially technical or systematic way. Though he does famously ask "What can I know?" (A805/B833), as a question that concerns the goal of theoretical inquiry as a whole, and also famously claims that he intends "to deny [*aufheben*] knowledge to make room for faith" (Bxxx), he does not discuss knowledge and its conditions in the course of his argument in the first *Critique* in the same detailed way that he does for cognition. Instead, when he talks about knowledge, it is mostly at the meta-level, focusing on whether we can know that we can have cognition (A43/B60) or consciousness (B409).²⁹ This is not to say that one cannot find an occasional passage where Kant does talk about, say, knowledge of things in themselves, but rather only that he does not take himself to be providing a comprehensive analysis of the conditions of knowledge in particular.³⁰

At the same time, Kant does eventually provide the outlines of an account of knowledge in the first *Critique*, namely in the Canon of Pure Reason in the Doctrine of Method. There, Kant discusses knowledge as one of the basic modes of "taking to be true" (*Fürwahrhalten*), or assent

(A822/B850; cf. 9: 66). What distinguishes assent from other mental acts is that it involves both an attitude toward a judgment and an assessment of the grounds, or reasons, that would support that attitude. Thus, one takes something to be true in different ways, or assents to it in a particular mode, on the basis of the reasons that one takes to justify what one is assenting to (where the kind of assent that is appropriate depends on the kind of reasons at hand along with an assessment of their adequacy).

In his discussion in the Canon, Kant begins by distinguishing between conviction and persuasion. If an assent “is valid for everyone merely as long as he has reason, then its ground is objectively sufficient” (A820/B848) and it amounts to conviction. By contrast, if an assent “has its ground only in the particular constitution of the subject”, then it is persuasion. With this distinction in hand, Kant then turns to distinguishing between three different kinds, or “stages” (*Stufen*), of assent as follows:

Taking something to be true, or the subjective validity of judgment, has the following three stages in relation to conviction (which at the same time is valid objectively): **having an opinion, believing,** and **knowing.** **Having an opinion** is taking something to be true with the consciousness that it is subjectively **as well as** objectively insufficient. If taking something to be true is only subjectively sufficient and is at the same time held to be objectively insufficient, then it is called **believing.** Finally, when taking something to be true is both subjectively and objectively sufficient it is called **knowing.** Subjective

sufficiency is called **conviction** (for myself), objective sufficiency, **certainty** (for everyone). I will not pause for the exposition of such readily grasped concepts. (A822/B850)

It is unfortunate that Kant takes the concepts that he uses to distinguish opinion, belief, and knowledge to be so easily grasped, since his failure to spell them out clearly leads to a non-trivial degree of indeterminacy about the basic structure of his account.³¹ Still, we can, perhaps, make out the following elements of his account of knowledge with some degree of confidence.

Kant relies on two notions to distinguish knowledge, belief, and opinion: subjective and objective sufficiency. What distinguishes knowledge and belief is that knowledge involves both subjective and objective sufficiency, whereas belief requires subjective sufficiency and objective insufficiency. In the *Jäsche Logik*, Kant articulates what seems to be substantially the same distinction by speaking of “reasons” or “reasons of cognition” (*Erkenntnisgründen*) for assent that are either subjectively sufficient, objectively sufficient, or both (9:66ff.). Although there is room for disagreement here, we take it that a reason is *subjectively* sufficient if, in a given subject, it brings about a firm conviction in the subject in question.³² A reason is *objectively* sufficient if it brings about certainty, i.e. “consciousness of necessity”, whereas a reason is objectively insufficient if it involves the consciousness of “the possibility of the contrary” (9:66). In other words, an objectively sufficient ground guarantees the truth of the judgment for which

it is a ground. Thus, while subjective sufficiency concerns the firmness of assent, objective sufficiency concerns the degree of epistemic justification.³³

Further, Kant seems to be committed to a version of epistemic internalism about knowledge insofar as knowledge requires *consciousness* of the objective ground, that is, access both to the grounds of knowledge and to their adequacy as grounds. If “consciousness of necessity” is understood as consciousness that given one’s grounds, the judgment to which one is assenting cannot be false, then Kant’s notion of knowledge, by requiring objectively sufficient grounds, also requires infallibility and thus truth.³⁴ However, this does not prevent Kant from accepting empirical (cf. 9:66) and even “historical” knowledge (e.g. knowledge from testimony) (cf. 8:141), both of which can be “certain” (cf. 9:71). Empirical and historical knowledge can be infallible if, e.g., knowledge is understood along broadly ‘disjunctivist’ lines.³⁵ If your reason to believe that there is a red ball in front of you, is that you can see the red ball, then this guarantees the truth of your belief, which thus amounts to knowledge. Now it may happen that you take yourself to have such a reason when in fact you do not, but this does not undermine the idea that if you *do* have such a reason, you cannot be mistaken and thus have knowledge.³⁶ In this way, Kant’s infallibilism about knowledge is compatible with a general acknowledgment of the fallibility of our cognitive faculties.

For Kant knowledge (*Wissen*) also has a more than merely etymological connection with science (*Wissenschaft*) (cf. 9:72). In fact, Kant

places very stringent requirements on science; it must be systematically ordered according to rational principles and be known a priori with apodictic certainty (4:468). It is in virtue of these requirements that we can attain the kind of insight and comprehension that Kant seems to have in mind with the sixth and seventh degrees of cognition in the passage from the *Jäsche Logik*. Further, given how little Kant says in a clear and explicit manner about objectively sufficient grounds, it is quite possible that the grounds, or justification, required for knowledge could include the additional systematic and a priori requirements demanded for it to qualify as science, properly so-called.

To summarize, Kant's account of knowledge contains the following elements. Most fundamentally, knowledge is a kind of assent, or taking to be true, and that assent must be based on an objective ground, since knowledge is a mental act that requires justification. In addition, the kind of justification the assent is based on must be such that it guarantees truth. Kant goes further by endorsing a substantive notion of justification that requires both apodictic certainty and an internalist element, and it may even include the kinds of coherence and systematicity that bestow the special status of science on a body of knowledge.

In light of this description of Kant's account of knowledge, we can see that it is either a special case of, or a close cousin to, the contemporary tripartite conception, according to which knowledge is warranted true belief.³⁷ For Kant's account satisfies each of the three elements of this

definition, or at least comes very close to doing so. As we have just emphasized, Kant requires that (1) knowledge be warranted, (2) the degree of certainty provided by the kind of warrant that he requires entails truth, and (3) assent might not be too dissimilar from what is meant by “belief” in contemporary contexts.³⁸ At the same time, insofar as Kant’s notion of justification entails certainty, his conception is much more demanding than most currently discussed variants of the tripartite conception of knowledge.

III. Comparison and Contrast

In light of these descriptions of Kant’s conceptions of cognition and knowledge, we are now in a position to show that because of extensive and fundamental differences the two cannot be identified.³⁹

The first and most fundamental difference between cognition and knowledge, as Kant understands it, concerns the *kind of mental states* they are. While cognition is a certain kind of conscious *representation*, knowledge, as a species of *assent*, is what we think of today as a propositional *attitude*.

Second, cognition, as such, does not require epistemic *justification*. It is enough for cognition if I am aware of some general feature of an object that I am encountering through my senses.⁴⁰ Knowledge, by contrast, requires a (very specific kind of) epistemic justification, namely an objectively sufficient reason. If Kant goes so far as to hold that any objective justification requires the kind of systematicity and coherence that is

characteristic of scientific knowledge, the distance between cognition in the narrow sense and knowledge would be even greater.

Third, while knowledge requires truth, it is at least not obvious that cognition, even in the narrow sense, must always be true.

Fourth, while cognition explicitly requires that the existence of an object be given to us in intuition, there is no such restriction on knowledge. Though knowledge requires an objectively sufficient ground, this does not immediately entail that an object must be given in intuition.⁴¹

Finally, while cognition always involves the determination of a given object (i.e. attributing some general feature to it), knowledge as such does not, as the case of “analytic” knowledge shows.⁴² Thus, it seems in principle possible for Kant to allow for knowledge of objects of which we cannot have cognition.

In sum, while cognition is a conscious representation that is characterized by its representational content (conceptual determination of an object), semantic features (successful reference to an existing object) and object-involving character (awareness of the existence and features of objects), knowledge is a propositional attitude that is defined in terms of a particular kind of epistemic justification. Therefore, cognition, for Kant, is clearly distinct from knowledge as he understands it.⁴³

But cognition is also distinct from our contemporary notion of knowledge, which, as we have seen, is less specific than Kant’s. Unsurprisingly, many of the reasons that tell against identifying cognition

with knowledge as Kant understands it, also speak against identifying it with our contemporary notion of knowledge. Insofar as cognition is an objective representation that has a specific kind of semantic content, it need not involve any kind of epistemic justification. Insofar as one can speak of cognitions being false, it does not entail truth. And because cognition as such does not involve assent, it is different in kind from belief. In short, cognition requires neither justification, nor belief, and perhaps not even truth, and is thus fundamentally distinct from knowledge as we understand it today.

If cognition and knowledge are thus distinct, several questions immediately arise. For one, if cognition is different in character from knowledge, is cognition still philosophically significant and if so, how? For another, could cognition be relevant for knowledge even though it is distinct from it? As for the first question, it is, we hope, clear that Kant's concern with cognition reveals an interest in a wide range of fundamental philosophical issues involving reference (both singular and general), representational content (both non-conceptual and conceptual), and the nature of (objective) representation and judgment. For Kant is concerned with nothing less than how it is possible for us to represent and be directly aware of particular objects and their determinate features.⁴⁴ Thus, even where Kant's focus in the first *Critique* is not on either epistemic justification or epistemology in the narrow sense (of warranted true belief), he is clearly interested in a broad array of issues concerning objective representation that remain at the center of philosophical debate today.

To the best of our knowledge, Kant does not address the second question explicitly. However, given the accounts we have provided above, we believe that cognition in the narrow sense can contribute to knowledge in at least two central ways. First, if knowledge is a kind of assent and what we assent to is a judgment, then whenever the judgment we assent to qualifies as a cognition, knowledge is an assent to a cognition. Second, cognition can contribute to the kind of objective justification that is required for knowledge. As we saw above, Kant did not specify what would count as an objective justification and how it would guarantee truth. But since human beings have cognitive access to the existence and determinate features of an object only through cognition, all justification of *empirical* knowledge must, it seems, involve cognition of empirical objects. For instance, knowledge that there is a red ball in front of me will be based on my being aware of the ball before me and its being red, i.e. on my cognition of it. Moreover, the kind of awareness that is involved in cognition fits with the requirement that we be aware both of the grounds involved in the justification of knowledge and of the adequacy of these grounds. For if the cognition is (at least) part of the relevant grounds and cognition involves awareness of the object, then we can be aware both of the grounds and of how they could support the judgment to which one is assenting (though more is required for this complex awareness than the mere presence of a cognition). As a result, it is possible to see how cognition can contribute to the justification required for knowledge without itself being an instance of knowledge.

IV. Consequences for Understanding the *Critique of Pure Reason*

If cognition is distinct from knowledge, what implications does this have for our understanding of Kant's central tenet in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, his two-fold claim that human cognition, including synthetic cognition a priori, is possible with respect to empirical objects, but not for things in themselves?

Most importantly, distinguishing clearly between cognition and knowledge allows us to see that Kant's claim, and indeed his main focus in the *Critique*, is not primarily epistemic, but semantic, since it concerns the conditions of the semantic features of our representations rather than in what is specifically required for knowledge. That is, Kant's concern with synthetic a priori cognition and with the possibility of cognition of things in themselves is first and foremost a concern with the semantic presuppositions of representations that would provide us with a conscious awareness of the existence of objects and (at least some of) their determinate features. The main line of Kant's argument is that (1) synthetic a priori cognitions are possible (in theoretical philosophy) only if we have a priori intuitions, since they make it possible for us to connect a priori representations that are not connected by means of purely logical relations, and (2) it is because we do not come into immediate contact with things in themselves that we cannot form representations of them that would have the kind of semantic content required for cognition in the sense that is of interest to Kant. In short, Kant is

interested, not primarily in knowledge, but in specific kinds of semantic features of our representations—awareness of the existence and general features of individual objects—and wants to show (against rationalists like Leibniz) that our representations of (at least certain) things in themselves lack these features.

But isn't it one of Kant's goals in the first *Critique* to show that the principles of the understanding (such as the principle of causality) provide us, not just with cognition, but with a priori *knowledge* about empirical objects? Note that this is not something Kant ever explicitly says. To maintain that his concern in the first *Critique* is primarily epistemological, would thus require showing that his various arguments about the possibility of cognition are in fact about the kind of 'objective grounds' Kant requires for knowledge, rather than about the semantic considerations specific to cognition.

This is not to say, however, that Kant is not at all concerned with knowledge in the first *Critique*. As noted above, he famously says that he had "to deny knowledge [of immortality, freedom, and God] in order to make room for faith" (Bxxx). That is, Kant denies that we can have any *substantive* knowledge of *specific* things in themselves. And the justification for this claim is now clear: such knowledge claims would be lacking in their objective justification on just those points that prevent us from having cognition of things in themselves. At the same time, because knowledge is different from cognition, he can allow that we have *some* knowledge of things in

themselves. For example, he can allow that we know that things in themselves are not spatio-temporal and that they exist (as a necessary presupposition of the appearances that we encounter in experience), two claims to which Kant is clearly committed. Perhaps he would even be willing to grant that analytic truths apply to things in themselves as well.⁴⁵

But note two crucial features of such claims to knowledge of things in themselves. First, the justifications of such claims would have to be independent of any particular cognition we might have. Even if Kant's reasons for asserting these claims are a matter of considerable dispute, it is clear that they would have to be supported by some kind of philosophical argument (e.g., a transcendental argument) rather than specific cognitions. Second, these claims are generic in character. That is, they do not pertain to some things in themselves and not to others, but rather apply to all or none alike.⁴⁶ This is one of the features that distinguishes such knowledge of things in themselves from cognition in the narrow sense, since cognition, in the fundamental case of singular cognition, requires a (direct or indirect) relation to (the existence of) an individual object with features that distinguish it from other objects.

As a result, the distinction between cognition and knowledge as well as the distinction between generic knowledge of things in themselves and knowledge that would distinguish between specific things in themselves, are crucial to understanding Kant's central claims in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For even if it is possible to have some generic philosophical knowledge of

things in themselves, such knowledge does not prevent Kant from arguing that we cannot have cognition of things in themselves, since our representations of them lack the appropriate semantic features. Nor does it keep him from claiming that we cannot have knowledge of those specific things in themselves that are the objects of traditional metaphysics, such as God, freedom, and the soul, since we do not possess the kind of cognitions that would be needed to support the objective justifications that such specific knowledge claims would require. In short, drawing these kinds of distinctions enables, we hope, an approach to the *Critique of Pure Reason* that is both more faithful to the text and of considerable philosophical interest in its own right.⁴⁷

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¹ In Kemp Smith's defense, "Erkenntnis" is Kant's translation of "*cognitio*", which, in medieval philosophical texts, is commonly translated as "knowledge".

² Allison 2004 and Guyer 1987.

³ Henrich 1973.

⁴ Cf. Guyer's and Wood's translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in the Cambridge Edition of Kant's writings, who mostly translate 'Erkenntnis' as 'cognition' (but cf. e.g. B25 and A237/B297 B25, where it is translated as 'knoweldge').

⁵ For a clear and representative statement of this reading, cf. Grüne 2009, 27f.

⁶ In the following, we restrict ourselves to theoretical cognition. Kant does introduce (and extensively use) the term practical cognition, but his views on the practical case are complex and would require separate treatment. (See Kain, 2010 for helpful discussion of practical cognition.) Further, though Kant distinguishes several different types of theoretical cognition—a priori, historical, mathematical, self-cognition—we confine ourselves to the more generic notion of cognition in general.

⁷ If analytic judgments qualify as knowledge, they require neither the existence of an object nor the attribution of features to it.

⁸ We have benefitted from papers by Tolley (unpublished manuscript, January 28, 2013), Schafer (unpublished manuscript, Nov. 13, 2013), and Chignell (2014), all of whom distinguish between cognition and knowledge, albeit in ways that differ from ours in their details.

⁹ Note that although "*Erkenntnis*" is a common German word, especially when used as a verb in "*erkennen*", it is a technical term in eighteenth-century philosophy insofar as it was used as the German equivalent of "*cognitio*", which had been a commonly used term in philosophy since the middle ages and

throughout early modern philosophy. Although Kant wrote all his major works in German, most of his terminology is deeply rooted in the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition. On the use of “cognitio” in early modern philosophy and Kant’s immediate predecessors, cf. Carriero (2013), and Tolley (unpublished manuscript).

¹⁰ The *Jäsche Logik* has a somewhat uncertain status in Kant’s corpus, because Jäsche was heavily involved in the production of the book in such a way that one cannot be sure that it truly reflects Kant’s position in every respect. However, a very similar list of *six* degrees of cognition can be found both in Kant’s handwritten *Reflexion* 2394 (16:343) as well as in the lecture transcript *Logik Pölitz* (24:539). Interestingly, while the third degree from the *Jäsche Logik* (“kennen (noscere)”) is missing in the lecture transcript, the fourth degree (“erkennen (cognoscere)”) is missing in the *Reflexion* (also cf. *Logik Dohna-Wundlacken*; 24:730). So the seven degrees in the Jäsche-Logik may be the result of Jäsche’s combining the two six-step lists. In any case, the distinction between the degrees of cognition and their ordering seem to be Kant’s own.

¹¹ Cf. 9:91, where Kant seems to use “cognition” in the *Stufenleiter* sense by saying that “all cognition, that is, all representations related with consciousness to an object, are either intuitions or concepts” (also cf. 24:752). In the *Jäsche Logik*, Kant defines the relevant sense of “consciousness” as “a representation that some other representation is in me” (9:33).

¹² Other readings of the *Stufenleiter* passage are possible. Thus, although Kant is most naturally read in this way, he does not *explicitly* claim that *all* intuitions and *all* concepts are cognitions (but rather only that all cognitions are either intuitions or concepts). This would allow for concepts that are not cognitions,

and ideas might be examples thereof.

¹³ Some of these differences seem to derive from a difference in emphasis: Where the classification in the *Logik* focuses more on *acts* of cognition (“to perceive something”, “to understand something” etc.), the *Stufenleiter* is interested in *kinds* of representations (“perception”, “notion” etc.)

¹⁴ See also B146.

¹⁵ These conditions are described more fully in Watkins and Willaschek (2017).

¹⁶ It may seem that existence cannot be required for givenness, since givenness is necessary for cognition and some of Kant’s formulations seems to suggest that what is required for cognition is not the existence, but only the real possibility of the cognized object (cf. e.g. Bxxivf. Fn). However, on our reading real possibility is required not for the givenness-, but for the thought-condition on cognition to be satisfied. Cf. below. For a more detailed argument for requiring that the givenness condition be understood as involving existence (for both empirical and mathematical objects), see Watkins and Willaschek (2017a and 2017b). Note also, however, that the main point of this paper obtains regardless of whether one accepts our specific interpretation of the givenness condition.

¹⁷ Cf. the following passage, where Kant uses “given” first in the passive sense relevant for human beings and then in the active sense pertaining to the divine mind: “a divine understanding, which would not represent *given* objects, but through whose representation the objects would themselves at the same time be *given*, or produced” (B145; emphasis added).

¹⁸ Kant indicates that cognition involves more than a concept when he notes that if “an intuition corresponding to the concept could not be given at all, then it would be a thought as far as its form is concerned, but without any object,

and by its means no cognition of anything at all would be possible, since, as far as I would know, nothing would be given nor could be given to which my thought could be applied" (B146). That is, it is not simply that we would in fact lack an object, but also that, as far as we could tell, no such object *could* be given. Kant's interest in "relation to an object" arises in the context of concepts, and thus the thought condition, rather than in that of intuitions, and the givenness condition.

¹⁹ This point is sometimes connected with the claim that objects must be shown to be really possible (Bxxvi), where real possibility is contrasted with logical possibility. Because Kant's notion of real possibility is complex and does not match up neatly with that of, say, metaphysical possibility, we do not consider how it bears on the thought-condition. Kant's discussion at, e.g., A96 is relevant, where he explicitly notes that one can think (but not cognize) "objects that are perhaps impossible, or that are perhaps possible in themselves but cannot be given in any experience". Note also that on this understanding of real possibility if an object is given in intuition and thus exists, one still needs to establish that the object is really possible, for real possibility, as we understand it, is tied to a concept insofar as one must be able to show that the object could also be given in such a way that our concept can apply to it.

²⁰ For example, Kant sometimes says that the categories must be shown to have "Sinn" und "Bedeutung", or sense and significance (or meaning). Though Kant sometimes seems to identify these terms and to take them both to indicate reference, there are other passages (A241/B300) that suggest a subtler set of distinctions. According to these passages, it is one thing for a concept to refer to an object, another to demonstrate that it can refer, and yet another to have a sense of what an object is like or how the object would (have

to) appear to us for the concept to apply to it (B149).

²¹ Kant adds a further specification to the thought-condition, namely that thought must contain positive content to contribute to cognition: “[i]t is not yet a genuine cognition if I merely indicate what the intuition of the object **is not**, without being able to say what is then contained in it; for then I have not represented the possibility of an object for my pure concept of the understanding at all” (B149).

²² This shows that the relation between a representation and its object that is constitutive of a cognition is not one of adequate representation or “agreement” (A58/B83).

²³ Kant denies only that a cognition could be “wholly false” (24:93), presumably because this would make it impossible for the representation to stand in a suitable relation to its object.

²⁴ Cf. Kant’s discussions of the relation between truth and cognition at B115 and A293/B350, neither of which decides the issue. The mere fact that “*erkennen*” in German is a success verb and thus appears to imply truth does not help either since Kant *does* allow for false cognition.

²⁵ However, only singular cognitions directly represent individual objects as such; general cognitions, which satisfy the givenness-condition only in a more relaxed sense, do so only indirectly, by having singular cognitions as their instances.

²⁶ Kant sometimes speaks of assent (“*Fürwahrhalten*”) as a kind of judging (e.g. 9:66), which makes sense insofar as assent is directed at a judgment. But the converse does not hold, since Kant explains judgment as a kind of complex conscious representation and never mentions assent. It is one thing consciously to represent some objective state of affairs (such as a ball’s being

red), it is another to take it to be true that this state of affairs obtains (that the ball is red). This does not mean, however, that cognition consists in the mere entertaining of a thought. Rather, in the basic case, it is the awareness of the existence of an objects and some of its features.

²⁷ “Judgment” (like *Urteil*) is ambiguous between the act of judging and the content judged. We do not want to deny that Kant sometimes uses “judgment” in the former sense, which may be assimilated to that of “assent(ing)”. Where Kant identifies judgment and cognition, however, he typically uses judgment in the latter sense (for a kind of representation).

²⁸ We take this to be a claim not about cognition in general, but, as the context makes clear, about philosophical cognition in particular.

²⁹ Where the English translation has Kant speaking of an “unknown object” (A479/B507), “unknown” is actually a translation of “*unbekannt*”, which is a cognate not of “knowledge” (*Wissen*), but rather of “cognition” (*Erkenntnis*).

³⁰ Matters are different when it comes to the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, which focuses on the question of scientific knowledge.

³¹ Moreover, while Kant expands on his accounts of opinion and belief in the course of the Canon, knowledge does not receive separate treatment, but is mentioned only in passing after the quoted passage. In fact, Kant’s main focus in Section Three of the Canon is on belief (as the attitude appropriate towards God’s existence and the immortality of the soul). Thus, the only paragraph in the whole *Critique* that explicitly addresses the concept of knowledge does so in order to clarify, not the concept of knowledge, but that of belief. This underlines our previous observation that knowledge is not Kant’s central concern in the first *Critique*.

³² For a similar reading, cf. Pasternack 2011, 202.

³³ For a different reading, cf. Chignell (2007, 33), who claims (against Kant's insistence that knowledge requires certainty) that objectively sufficient grounds are fallible (42). This claim may rest on confusing fallibility in the sense that we can mistakenly take ourselves to know something (and thus to have objectively sufficient grounds) with the (for Kant incoherent) assumption that knowledge itself (and the grounds it is based on) could be fallible (also cf. next paragraph).

³⁴ That certainty implies truth is supported by the fact that Meier, on whose textbook Kant based his logic lectures, defines certainty as "consciousness of the truth of a cognition" (1752, § 29). Kant accepts this definition "for the time being" in Logic Blomberg (24:57). Also cf. Logic Blomberg "the certainty of a cognition, on the other hand, rests on its objective truth" (24:143).

³⁵ Cf. McDowell (2011). Our fallibility, according to McDowell, resides in our cognitive *capacities* (which can be misapplied), not in the individual case (which is either true or false and, if true and based on the right kind of reason, knowledge).

³⁶ Cf. Engstrom (2009, 108 ff.), for a similar account of error in Kant.

³⁷ Despite Gettier, most current epistemologists seem to accept some kind of tripartite definition of knowledge (true belief plus X).

³⁸ For discussion of significant differences between these two notions, see Chignell (2007, 37).

³⁹ In what follows, unless otherwise indicated, 'cognition' means 'cognition in the narrow sense'. That cognition in the wider sense differs from knowledge should be obvious.

⁴⁰ Since cognition requires the involvement of concepts whose objective reality must be established (e.g., in the Transcendental Deduction for the categories),

cognition may require some kind of (“philosophical”) justification, but it does not require the kind of (“epistemic”) justification that is at issue with knowledge.

⁴¹ If Kant’s account of what an objectively sufficient ground could be specified further, this claim might need to be revised accordingly. It is, to our mind, striking that Kant does not explicitly relate his account of objectively sufficient grounds to his account of cognition.

⁴² According to Kant, analytic judgments do not contain “determinations” (9:111), that is, do not “determine” their objects (also cf. 20:268: “Determining means judging synthetically”). Kant does at times speak of “analytic cognition”, but we are inclined to read those passages as referring to cognition in the broader sense.

⁴³ It is true that the special kind of objective justification that Kant requires for knowledge involves apodictic certainty, i.e., *consciousness* of necessity, which might seem to bring cognition closer to knowledge after all. However, the kind of consciousness involved in apodictic certainty is different from the kind of consciousness that one has in cognition. For in the case of cognition, we must be conscious of the *object*, including its existence and features, whereas in the case of knowledge, we must be conscious of the (objective) *grounds* that justify our assent to a judgment, and of their *adequacy* as objective grounds. In short, though consciousness must be present in both cases, what one must be aware of in each case is quite different.

⁴⁴ Indeed, even a cursory acquaintance with current literature devoted to contemporary philosophical topics reveals that the issues Kant is concerned with are still very much lively topics of debate, as is on display in, for example, Burge (2010 and 2013). How experience can afford us a direct awareness of

objects and their features is a central theme in McDowell (1994 and 2009).

⁴⁵ Although Kant does occasionally use some variant of the phrase ‘analytic cognition’ (cf. A8/B12), he does not, as far as we are aware, ever use the phrase analytic knowledge, so this point is a somewhat speculative suggestion. Still, one might think that it is hard to see how, given their nature, analytic propositions could be false, though one might well have concerns about whether they have the kind of semantic content that is necessary for them to refer to objects of a given domain and thus qualify as cognition.

⁴⁶ This is not to exclude that the empirical world might be grounded in some but not all of the things in themselves. It excludes only that we could know which they are. In this sense, our knowledge of the intelligible ground of experience (the “transcendental object”; cf. A109) is purely general.

⁴⁷ Both authors contributed equally to this paper. For helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper we thank audiences at the Deutsche Kongress für Philosophie 2014 in Münster, Germany, a conference on Kant and Knowledge and Cognition at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and at a meeting of the History of Philosophy of Roundtable at University of California, San Diego as well as referees for Synthese.